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OBSERVATIONS UPON THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION IN FRENCH LYCÉES

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For a survey of the organized and formal instruction in French composition provided under the French educational system, the investigator must direct his attention primarily to the relevant courses in the French *lycée*. Although the French student continues to receive vigorous incidental guidance in writing in connection with courses in literature throughout his academic career—even up to the last syllable of his oral examination for the *doctorat*¹—nevertheless the French universities, in general, offer no courses devoted exclusively to composition. To the European, indeed, the presence of such secondary-school courses in our American universities and colleges seems anomalous.²

In the following few pages, then, I offer a brief account of a modest inquiry of my own into the methods used in French *lycées* for teaching composition in the mother-tongue. This account is inspired, especially, by personal observation and contact, for during a sojourn in Paris last autumn, I had opportunities both for visiting *lycée* classrooms, and for talking privately with teachers. By the teachers themselves, moreover, I was introduced to the official doctrine concerning composition as formulated by the French

¹ In attending an examination for the French *doctorat* the American Doctor of Philosophy is astonished at the proportion of attention given to the literary form of the *thèse*, or *thèses*.

² See, for example, P. J. Hartog, *The Writing of English*, Oxford, 1908, p. 104.

government, and was in this way enabled to draw inferences considerably beyond the range of my own observation. I propose, then, first a brief statement of the *lycée* curriculum, together with certain official interpretations, secondly an account of typical experiences in the classroom, and thirdly a few of the reflections that inevitably occur to a foreign visitor.

I

Excluding the preparatory and elementary divisions, the *lycée* course proper comprises the studies of seven years, as follows:¹

1. Classe de Sixième (pupil's age about twelve years)
2. Classe de Cinquième (pupil's age about thirteen years)
3. Classe de Quatrième (pupil's age about fourteen years)
4. Classe de Troisième (pupil's age about fifteen years)
5. Classe de Deuxième (pupil's age about sixteen years)
6. Classe de Première (pupil's age about seventeen years)
7. Classe de Philosophie (pupil's age about eighteen years)

Without examining the numerous intricacies within this curriculum of seven years, we may seek a general statement as to the place allotted to the study of French. Although our chief interest, for the moment, is the subject of composition, our discussion of this matter would be incomplete, or even unintelligible, without a recognition of the fact that throughout the *lycée* course literature, grammar, and composition are taught as one subject. The curriculum of the average pupil in this broader subject may be outlined in the following general terms:

CLASSE DE SIXIÈME (French 3 hours out of 23 a week).

Literature: Reading, explanation, and recitation (from memory) of French authors.

Texts are chosen from the following: selected pieces of classical French prose and verse, modern French versions of mediaeval tales, La Fontaine, Fénelon, Buffon, selections from nineteenth-century poets.

Language: Study of syntax, exercises in the French language and orthography.

Composition: Short oral exercises, and short written compositions.

¹ An admirable report on the system of secondary and university education in France, together with special studies of particular aspects of the system, has been published by the English Board of Education, in *Special Reports on Educational Subjects*, Vol. XXIV. London: Wyman & Sons, 109 Fetter Lane, E.C., 1911. Pp. xii+554. 3s.

CLASSE DE CINQUIÈME (French 3 hours out of 23 a week).

Literature: Reading, explanation, and recitation of French authors. Texts are chosen from the following: modern French versions of tales from mediaeval poets and prose-writers, scenes from Corneille and Molière, Racine's *Esther*, La Fontaine's *Fables* (first six books), Fénelon's *Télémaque*, selected descriptions from Buffon, prose narrations from authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, selected poets of the nineteenth century.

Language: Study of syntax, exercises in the French language and orthography.

Composition: Simple oral and written compositions.

CLASSE DE QUATRIÈME (French 3 hours out of 22 a week).

Literature: Reading, explanation, and recitation of French authors. Texts are chosen from the following: selected scenes from Corneille and Molière, Racine's *Athalie*, La Fontaine's *Fables* (last six books), Boileau's *Le Lutrin*, selected dialogues and fables from Fénelon, Voltaire's *Charles XII* and *Siècle de Louis XIV*, portraits and stories from mémoires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, extracts from Chateaubriand and Michelet. Additional assignments for home reading, to be controlled by work in class.

Language: Review of French grammar. Exercises in the French language and orthography.

Composition: Simple oral and written compositions. Exercises in versification, in connection with the reading of poetry in class.

CLASSE DE TROISIÈME (French 3 hours out of 23 a week).

Literature: Reading, explanation, and recitation of French authors. Texts are chosen from the following: selected plays of Corneille, Molière, and Racine, selected letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, selections from Boileau, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, and Michelet. Additional assignments for home reading. At this point a short history of French literature is put into the hands of the pupil.

Language: Incidental instruction in historical grammar.

Composition: Longer compositions.

CLASSE DE SECONDE (French 3 hours out of 23 a week).

Literature: Explanation and recitation of French authors. Texts are chosen from the following: a long list including extracts from mediaeval literature, selected plays of Corneille, Molière, and Racine, selected letters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, extracts from mémoires and correspondence bearing upon seventeenth-

century society, selections from Rousseau. Additional assignments for home reading. History of French literature from the beginning to the end of the sixteenth century.

Language: Study of an advanced textbook on grammar.

Composition: Longer compositions.

CLASSE DE PREMIÈRE (French 3 hours out of 24 a week).

Literature: Explanation and recitation of French authors.

Texts are chosen from the following: a long list including selected plays of Corneille, Molière, and Racine, Pascal's *Pensées*, extracts from Montesquieu, Buffon, Voltaire, and Diderot, extracts from *mémoires* and correspondence bearing upon eighteenth-century society. Additional assignments for home reading. History of French literature from the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Composition: Longer compositions.

CLASSE DE PHILOSOPHIE.

No direct study of French composition and literature.

The general principles underlying this curriculum in French, and incisive suggestions as to the practical application of it, are generously given in several official documents, notably in the ministerial *Instructions* of 1909, from which I offer pertinent excerpts.

The importance attached to the explanation of literary texts, and the part occupied by this exercise in the teaching of composition, are indicated in the following passage:¹

If there is one characteristic feature of the reforms of 1902 with regard to the teaching of French, it is that reading with explanation, which was previously too much subordinated to literary history, has passed from the second place to the first, and by means of the increased precision of its methods has become more and more an instrument of intellectual and moral education. If well conducted, it is an exercise in logic and an exercise in composition, since it points out and makes the pupils discover the consecutive order of the ideas in a given piece and the relationships between them; it is an exercise in clearness of thought, since the exact meaning of the essential words and their relation to the ideas which they express must be defined; an exercise to some extent in style, since, more especially in the case of the pupils of the *classe de lettres*,² it

¹ *Special Reports*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 155-56, dealing with the work of the *Classe de Seconde* and the *Classe de Première*.

² The classes in French, Latin, and Greek in the *Classe de Seconde* and *Classe de Première* are termed *classes de lettres*.

may inspire a feeling for felicities of literary form; and finally, since such felicities do not consist in form alone, it is an exercise of which the educational value cannot be overestimated.

But if no exercise is more important than this, none is more difficult, and there is none which is conceived of in ways more different and at times more contradictory. This peculiar difficulty arises mainly from two causes. The explanation of texts in the classical language rests on its own particular traditions, while such traditions are wanting in the case of the explanation of French texts, at any rate, to the methodical and thorough kind of explanation to be understood here. And then, since an explanation of this kind must vary with circumstances, with the author studied, with the works, or portions of works, of one and the same author, with the different points of view from which such works are judged by different minds, the explanation cannot be made to follow absolute rules. Hence, the *Instructions* are limited to the observation that all possible guidance with regard to the method of planning out an explanation seems to be implied in the two injunctions "to select" and "to define" (*choisir et préciser*); to select a text of interest, of reasonable length and yet nevertheless forming a complete piece in itself (*un tout*); and from this piece, passing over the less characteristic details, to select a series of observations co-ordinated naturally and with a common object in view; to define, that is to say, to perceive the difficulties, to make them apparent to the class, and after discussing, to solve them; to avoid digressions which would lead the class to forget the text, to avoid wearisome paraphrase and pseudo-systematic divisions which are out of relation with the real subject-matter and turn the living page into a sterile piece of anatomy.

In connection with this careful reading texts in class one should mention also the assignments of passages to be memorized, and the assignments of books for home reading. Concerning the assignments for memorizing, the *Instructions* speak vigorously:¹

It is necessary to attach more importance [than at present] to the recitation of lessons. If formerly too much importance was attached to the memory, it is at present too much neglected, and it now seems to have become deficient in the case of too many pupils. Lessons to be learnt by heart are often ill known or badly recited. Again, they are often too much subdivided. It is right that a text to be learnt by heart should be sufficiently short not to overwhelm the pupil, but it should be long enough to impose on him the useful discipline of an effort (*la gêne utile*). The recitation lesson should be given twice a week. . . . Ten minutes or at most a quarter of an hour should be devoted to it.

¹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 153, dealing with the work of the *Classe de Seconde* and the *Classe de Première*.

The memory will be most efficaciously developed and kept active by intelligent and methodical exercises. The ease with which the text to be learnt by heart will be retained will depend on the thoroughness with which the previous explanation has been given and on the continuity of this explanation. Too many masters divide up the piece into small portions, and deal with only a given portion after the preceding portion has been recited. It is better, first of all, to explain the whole piece in full detail, and then to divide it into portions to be learnt by heart successively, and when the time comes for each to be recited, to ask only such questions with regard to it as are necessary to make sure that the explanation has not been forgotten. Indeed, the recitation lesson will gain in variety and in interest by the introduction of well-chosen questions on the matter or the form of the text cited, provided that the recitation itself is not too frequently interrupted.

Intelligent diction is a matter of even greater necessity in these than in the lower classes. Nevertheless, the question arises how it comes about that many boys, although they understand what they recite, seem to wish it to appear as if they did not. This false shame should be combated, and the master must not be discouraged by the failure of the first attempt in this direction. A low mark should be assigned to any recitation given indistinctly or monotonously, even if the text is accurately known by heart.

As to home reading the *Instructions* give the following advice:¹

The pupils should be advised to devote their spare time on Thursdays² and Sundays to reading for themselves, either in the preparation room or at home. The masters can do a great deal to stimulate the desire for knowledge (*la curiosité intellectuelle*), either by suggesting exactly the reading necessary or useful for the preparation of a composition, marking a special page or a passage; or else by encouraging the pupils to read without any other guidance than a list, as varied and as extensive as possible, of books suited to the age and intelligence of the young readers, from which they may choose freely, with no other thought than of their own pleasure. The essential thing is to give them a taste for reading. It is good to question the pupils from time to time on the books that they have read spontaneously in this way, to ask them to give a short viva voce account of them impromptu, and thus to show that the master is interested, and that he takes notice of all intellectual effort, even if it be not made as a direct preparation for the work of the class. This kind of unconstrained conversation, directed with skill, stimulates the mental activity of the pupils, and gives an excellent opportunity for advice in season, which will be all the better received when given as simply as possible.

The general notion of method underlying the constant study of grammar is indicated as follows:³

¹ *Special Reports*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 141-42.

² The weekly vacation.

³ *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 147-48.

French is a living language which is known insufficiently if it has been learned merely by usage; the study of grammar is therefore a necessity. But grammar is to be used not only to teach the pupils to read and write correctly on the one hand, and on the other hand to guide them to a better understanding of living and dead writers, but also to form their judgment, a fact which must be remembered in the enunciation as well as in the application of grammatical rules.

With regard to method, attention is to be paid to the following instructions:

1. The rule is never to be separated from the example, the formula from its application. The teacher is to begin by quoting examples in order to prepare the way for the rule, and when the rule has been first understood and then repeated, he is to point out examples which confirm it, so that he starts from examples and ends with examples.

2. The teaching of grammar throughout all the classes should be kept extremely simple. By simplicity here is meant real simplicity and not an excessive conciseness resulting in abstract formulae which the children cannot understand. The difficulties created by grammarians are to be ignored, and only those arising from usage and the historical development of the language, and requiring explanation, are to be dealt with.

3. The attention of the teachers of the *Classe de Sixième* is especially directed to the necessity for recapitulation. Since the pupils of this class are recruited from various sources, it is important that before beginning the study of the syllabus special to the class, the teacher should make sure that his pupils are acquainted with the syllabus of the *Classe de Septième* and in particular that they know the grammatical forms. This methodical revision is to be carried out not by means of formal lessons, but by means of oral exercises. . . .

4. Finally, without going into detail, a reminder is here given that the pupils must never be required to learn a rule which has not been previously explained to them, and that the explanation of a rule, or of a series of rules, should not take up a whole lesson. Half an hour's teaching of grammar seems to be the maximum for a child's endurance.

Passing on to a consideration of the direct teaching of composition, we encounter definite directions as to (1) the graduation of the work, (2) the method of assignment, (3) the correction of themes, and (4) oral composition. Concerning the adjustment of the work to the progress of the pupil, the *Instructions* speak as follows:¹

The general idea governing the selection of subjects for written work in French in the various classes is that as the boy becomes adolescent he should not be treated too soon as a grown-up man, nor induced to have a misplaced confidence in his own powers, by being asked to make premature intellectual efforts. If this point of view is accepted, there will be no exercises set in pure

¹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 154, dealing with the work of the *Classe de Seconde* and the *Classe de Première*.

"invention," in which the pupil is required to derive his entire composition from his own intellectual resources, still so little developed; and no essays set on ambitious subjects that demand a certain maturity of critical sense and of literary style, essays which can yield no solid result and which are not without danger to the pupil.

The literary studies of the university student and the free fancy of the writer, pursued at their own risks, are one thing, the written composition in secondary schools is another. The latter should be always more or less prepared with the help of the master and directed by him, and always in close relationship and co-ordination with the teaching given and received in a particular year, just as such teaching is made to depend on the teaching of the previous years. It is a prolongation, a verification, and a corollary of the oral teaching, the explanations, and the readings, in the classroom. The teacher must be on his guard against subjects of too original a kind (*il faut se défier des sujets inattendus*). . . .

As in the lower classes, the subjects set for French composition must lie within the range of the experience or knowledge acquired by the pupils. The exercise to be performed is to be previously prepared by the master with the pupils, more or less completely. The subject-matter is to be examined, its special interest and opportunities are to be indicated, and an appeal made to the pupils' powers of reflection. The following are examples of suitable exercises in composition for the *Classe de Quatrième* and the *Classe de Troisième*: very simple stories dealing (1) with historical or legendary subjects (taken from the syllabus for the class or from epochs previously studied); (2) with moral subjects, in which the pupil is to make use of what he has read and in which the exercise is to be brought into relation with the class in moral instruction; (3) with familiar and picturesque topics. Little sketches of everyday life, or descriptions, may also be given; and in all cases the pupil must have recourse to his own direct observation or, at any rate, base his work on real things within his knowledge. The subject may from time to time be treated in the form of a familiar letter.

Even in the *Classe de Troisième* exercises of pure invention, and critical discussions are out of place. Simple exercises in composition are to be preferred, such as summarizing of a short but complete piece, and practical exercises in correction at the blackboard, of which the chief object is to teach the pupil the method to be followed, first, in working out a composition, and secondly, in correcting it himself.

Exercises in versification in the *Classe de Quatrième* and the *Classe de Troisième* should be mainly oral, and given, as opportunity arises, during the reading of texts. If written exercises relating to this subject are not absolutely prohibited, it is recommended that extremely moderate use should be made of them.¹

¹ *Special Reports*, Vol. XXIV, p. 152, dealing with the work of the *Classe de Quatrième* and the *Classe de Troisième*.

The judicious outlining of assigned subjects is definitely prescribed in the following paragraph:¹

It is useful, if not always necessary, to give out a detailed subject (*matière*) for composition, and there are but few exercises in which it can be omitted without serious drawbacks. While greater or less detail should be given according to the nature of the subject and the age of the class, the fact of giving a detailed subject imposes a useful discipline on the minds of the pupils. They are taught to confine themselves within well-marked limits, to put their ideas into order, and to follow out a reasoning to its logical conclusion, before they venture on thinking and writing for themselves. What is here contemplated is obviously not subject-matter chosen at haphazard and borrowed ready made by the master without careful investigation, but a subject that is either original or one that he has made his own personal study, and that is the more likely, on account of the collaboration between master and pupils, to yield good results. The affair is, of course, as the master will perceive, one of degree. A subject-matter that is given in too great detail and leaves the pupil nothing to discover for himself may deprive him of all intellectual impetus and condemn him to a mere task of amplification. The faculty of distinguishing in a given subject the idea that is essential, from out of which the various parts of the composition must grow, is of course, the work of a mature mind, and we can scarcely ask school boys, of whom the oldest are very young, to attempt it without some preparatory hints, or without some sort of help. But under the prudent direction of a teacher who knows how to free the pupils gradually from his own guidance, they will learn to discover little by little for themselves what they have previously been taught to observe and to appreciate in the models that they try to emulate. Thus, as the pupils advance in the *classes de lettres*, the assistance given to them in setting a composition should gradually take less and less the form of a complete plan and more and more that of simple directions (*orientation*), so that as their powers develop they should not be denied all share of personal initiative in the work of composition.

The expectations of the government as to the correcting of themes are expressed as follows:²

The written corrections of compositions must precede and serve as a preparation for the oral correction, which is the essential form of correction, and to which in the *classes de lettres* at least three-quarters of an hour must be devoted.³ Apart from the importance attached by the parents of the pupils to written corrections, they are useful in showing the pupil how he is getting

¹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 154, dealing with the work of the *Classe de Seconde* and the *Classe de Première*.

² *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 155.

³ Three-quarters of an hour, that is, must be devoted to the collective oral correction of the one substantial weekly theme (*devoir*).

on, and what are still his weak points. It is therefore to be desired that the work of each pupil should be read through, even if not corrected in detail. It is indeed found that corrections in minute detail do not always produce the expected effect on the pupils. The actual form of correction of the exercises will differ with the size of the class and with the master. What is essential is that the pupils should be aware that their exercises will in any case be read through, and that they should thus be kept up to the mark. It is also essential that their attention should not be wearied in class by a monotonous procession of exercises, commented on one after the other.

The oral correction gives life to the written correction and saves it from being sterile. It is therefore an absolute rule that the compositions should never be corrected in class immediately after they have been given in, for it is impossible to criticize them effectively unless they have been read through beforehand, and still more impossible to compare them so as to extract from them those observations by which the class as a whole can alone profit, in other words, to co-ordinate the elements of the collective correction. This kind of correction does not in any way exclude the correction of an individual composition when it may give rise to some opportune or characteristic criticism. . . . When the master has extracted from the separate exercises and grouped together the ideas, and the good and bad passages of which the explanation and discussion may be useful to the class as a whole, the most important elements in the correction of the separate exercises will become an integral part of the collective correction, that which deals, as the *Instructions* say, "not with a few secondary details, but with the general idea of composition, considered as a logical whole, with its vital characteristics. Moreover," the *Instructions* continue, "the master will not merely criticize what has been actually written, but will try to show also what ought to have been done." In other words, the interest and utility of the collective correction lies in this, that the master reconstructs the composition in collaboration with his pupils out of material not derived exclusively either from his own preconceived notion of what the composition ought to be, or from the data taken from the different exercises sent in by the class, but from the best elements common to these data and to his own conception; so that the result of the lesson in composition is a reasoned construction, and a model of its kind, of which the impression will remain in the minds of the pupils.

Of at least one masterly application of this important principle of collective correction I shall give an account below.

The following brief exhortation as to oral composition gives merely a slight indication of what is, as a matter of fact, an extensive practice:¹

As it is important that the pupil should be exercised in speaking as well as in writing, these exercises are to be both oral and written. Among oral

¹ *Special Reports*, Vol. XXIV, p. 150.

exercises may be instanced short stories which the pupils have had told to them, descriptions of pictures, descriptions of things the pupils have seen, such as buildings, landscapes, scenes of family or school life and of everyday life.

Since I derived much information and enlightenment from that storehouse of experience, the *lycée* classbook (*cahier de textes*), I cannot forbear recognizing here, finally, the following sensible prescription of the government:¹

There should be in each class a class notebook in which all the subjects of the written exercises should be written out carefully with the date of each. This notebook serves not only as an indispensable book of reference for the pupils to verify the accuracy of the text taken down, but also as an index of the progress of the class and of the work accomplished, and on this ground it is of particular interest to the teachers themselves. Moreover, the masters of the next class above, which the pupils enter in October, by looking through the class notebook of the class they have just left, will avoid loss of time.

II

From official instructions so complete and so detailed as those from which I have quoted above, and from American preconceptions as to French love of system and orderliness, one might naturally enough infer that the teacher of composition in a French secondary school is intolerably hampered by prescription, inspection, and supervision. My conversations with the teachers themselves, however, revealed to me the absence of any such feeling among them. It appears that the teachers regard the official *Instructions* with great respect as a sane and humane document, as a useful guide, and as a repository for genuinely practical suggestions. This document is, indeed, a mere formulation of methods of which the efficacy had been proved through a long tradition of practical teaching. Naturally, then, the French teachers feel no repression under a system which they rightly regard as their own creation, and which, as a matter of fact, necessarily leaves to the teacher's originality the greater part of the technique of the classroom.

The pedagogical freedom and enthusiasm possible under this official system I had ample opportunity of observing in more than one classroom, and of two or three of these visits I offer a somewhat detailed account.

¹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. XXIV, p. 141.

I may begin with a recitation in the *Classe de Troisième* under Monsieur X, in the Lycée Louis le Grand. The thirty-six boys, fifteen years of age, had already scrambled to their places in the dingy recitation room when, accompanied by a porter carrying a chair, I was ushered into the room in somewhat formal fashion. After the pupils had paid their respects by rising to their feet, and after the teacher had received me cordially, I took my seat before the class beside the teacher's desk.

The hour was to be devoted to the criticism of a substantial weekly theme (*devoir*) of some 300 to 500 words upon the subject "Un Dialogue entre Monsieur Tant-Pis et Monsieur Tant-Mieux." The optimist and pessimist of the title were, it appeared, to be actual school boys. At the outset, one of the pupils passed about the corrected themes to their authors, in each case calling aloud the name of the writer and the numerical mark upon his theme. Meanwhile the teacher recorded the marks in his classbook, mumbling facetious observations that transformed the tension of those critical moments into a spell of good feeling.

Since he had previously corrected the themes carefully, and had given them an additional survey shortly before the recitation hour, the teacher remembered how nearly every one of his thirty-six pupils had treated the subject, could play upon his class as upon an orchestra, could call upon individuals to read aloud certain parts of their themes for public approval or condemnation, could dart hither and thither sly, significant glances. He began his general criticism by pointing out a prevailing tendency of the class toward colloquialism and slang. Although he justly attributed the fault partly to the nature of the subject itself—a dialogue between school boys—he finally roused himself to good-natured impatience, shouting to me, "Would a pupil of yours dare to litter his theme with such incredible slang as *fiche moi la peine* or *sans blague*?" I was obliged to reply that such misdemeanors are not unknown in America.

Monsieur X then discussed the chief difficulty of the task, which he conceived to lie in the fact that the subject itself suggested no definite beginning or end. He launched into good-natured ridicule of certain beginnings by such remarks as these: "Why

obtrude yourself into the opening? Why delay the beginning of the dialogue itself? What could be duller than Monsieur A's opening sentence, 'As I was on my way to school, I overheard my comrades Tant-Pis and Tant-Mieux in conversation concerning the weather'? Am I not right, Monsieur A? Monsieur D was far wiser in beginning promptly with the words, "What vile weather!" said Tant-Mieux, as he picked up his notebook from the sloppy pavement.' I beg you to begin with the thing itself. Let's have none of these perfunctory, egotistical introductions."

From the matter of beginnings the teacher passed on to the main ideas. Here he was, of course, far less dogmatic. He suggested that something must be done to give an atmosphere or tone—the whole dialogue must be dominated by some prevailing point of view or mood. He suggested incidents such as those arising out of meetings with other boys on a walk, or out of accidents on the street; he hinted at more grave and intimate conversation about the pleasures or hardships of life at home.

As to the endings of the dialogues Monsieur X was particularly severe. He deprecated the absence of a definite goal, and the tendency to great length. "Why not arrive, eventually, at some particular place? Why go on forever? Monsieur G, I thought your theme would never end. You had nothing definite to say, and you went on saying it *sans fin*. Stop at the door of the school, or, better still, stop with a bit of good repartee."

During the latter part of the hour the teacher read aloud two themes, giving the names of the writers, and summoned one lad to read aloud his own production. In each case Monsieur X summed up the achievement of the pupil in terms of remarks already made as to the ideal beginning, middle, and end. One of the themes he pronounced "pas mal"—high praise in a French *lycée*.

Waiving all consideration of this teacher's priceless good-nature, vivacity, and humane intelligence, we find the chief virtue of his procedure, I suppose, in the fact that in spite of his brusque treatment of details, he accomplished a definite and constructive general result. Since all the pupils had spent themselves upon the same definite task, each pupil felt the personal application of all that was said. The pupils—and the visitor—left the room with definite and

cheering ideas upon the problems involved in writing a dialogue, and with at least one useful model indelibly printed upon their minds. Far from hampered by official restrictions, Monsieur X had given life to the very words of the *Instructions*, which I venture to repeat:

The interest and utility of the collective correction lies in this, that the master reconstructs the composition in collaboration with his pupils out of material not derived exclusively either from his own preconceived notion of what the composition ought to be, or from the data taken from the different exercises sent in by the class, but from the best elements common to these data and to his own conception; so that the result of the lesson in composition is a reasoned construction, and a model in its kind, of which the impression will remain in the minds of the pupils.

In observing this doctrine Monsieur X displayed his humanity, his enthusiasm, his maturity, and his art.

With the living results of Monsieur X's classroom fresh in mind, I was cordially received by Monsieur Y, late one afternoon, before his *Classe de Première* in the Lycée Henri IV. After the forty pupils, seventeen or eighteen years of age, had expressed their formal greeting by rising momentarily, the teacher settled himself, with apparent satisfaction, for displaying the accomplishments of what, as he had previously told me, he considered a remarkable class.

The recitation began with the most characteristic of all French class exercises, an *explication de texte*; that is, first the ardent examination of the language and thought of a particular passage of literature, and secondly a generalization from the particular passage to the author's work as a whole. The passage was an extract from Pascal's *Pensées*. A boy was called upon to recite the opening paragraph, assigned for memorizing. When the lad broke down in the middle of what had promised to be a model recitation, his merciful teacher provided him a graceful retreat by remarking to the visitor, "Mauvais garçon, n'est-ce pas, Monsieur?" to the merriment of us all. The textual explanations themselves were careful and searching, and the generalizations were skilfully and sincerely made. The pupils were alert and seemed to be on terms of genuine familiarity with literature. Although they

displayed a dangerous facility in the cant of literary criticism, they showed also a considerable amount of real knowledge and true feeling.

After a quarter of an hour spent in *explication de texte*, the teacher proceeded to reports by pupils from their home reading. One recited a poem of De Musset, and one some stanzas of De Vigny. Two boys delighted us by reciting in dialogue a scene from Rotrou's *Sosie*.

From these enlivening exercises we shifted our attention, during the latter part of the hour, to a discussion of the weekly themes, which lay corrected upon the instructor's desk. The ambitious subject was "L'Avare de Molière n'est pas triste." The teacher had evidently not shared the fears of the French government lest the pupils become "critics before their time." In any case he need not have been surprised that the themes were of books bookish. He proceeded valiantly, however, to point out to the class what they ought to have done, and developed a live and logical outline, which, had it been provided in advance, would have insured a considerable number of good themes, even upon so unpromising a subject. The pupils must have left the room much stimulated by a vivacious and suggestive lecture, and eager to try the same subject again—a repetition for which, I inferred, no opportunity was to be given.

Since the themes were not returned to the class at the end of the hour, Monsieur Y generously allowed me to examine his corrections. At the head of each theme I found a substantial paragraph in red ink in which the teacher vigorously pointed out the general defects and merits of the exercise. These general criticisms were, as a whole, constructive and helpful. In the margins, moreover, were written numerous suggestions as to diction—the words *plat*, *laid*, and the like. Surprised, however, at the absence of corrections in grammar, I innocently inquired concerning this omission. To my inquiry Monsieur Y replied, with composure, "Nos élèves de *Première* ne font pas de fautes de grammaire." As a teacher of Freshman English in an American college, I could not conceal my astonishment at this complacent and millennial observation.

My dullest experience in a French classroom I owe to Monsieur Z, who imprisoned his forty pupils of the *Classe de Première* for an hour's discourse concerning their weekly themes based upon a passage of Quintilian. The task, assigned as a logical analysis and paraphrase of the classical passage, might, under a more humane instructor, have resulted in a fine intellectual discipline and in a living application. In Monsieur Z's hands, however, the recitation was degraded into a logical torturing of the Latin passage, accompanied by a university lecture on the evolution of literary criticism.

III

From a survey of the French system of teaching composition, from observations in the classroom, and from talks with teachers, one is tempted, even at the risk of repetition, to emphasize certain conclusions.

1. The attention of the visitor is called constantly to the close alliance of composition and literature. The conspicuous pride of the French boy in his own manner of writing is due in large measure to his constant, respectful, and pleasurable study of French classics. Throughout his course in the *lycée* he continues in what appears to be a cheerful critical analysis of French classical style and a genuine adoption of many of these critical results into his own writing. Although we may despair of engendering in our American youth the equivalent of this respect for French style, it appears, nevertheless, to many of us that our pupils in English composition need the stimulating ideal provided by a critical reading of our best English prose. To be sure, a prevailing defect in our high-school work in composition is the all-too-apparent dominance of literature, a dominance due largely, perhaps, to the comparative ease and economy of instruction in literature, and to the fact not only that our teachers are often ill equipped for humane instruction in composition and for rapid and effective theme-correction, but also that they are denied an opportunity for such teaching by the size and number of their classes. Could we depend upon having one substantial weekly theme vivaciously assigned and vigorously corrected, first out of class and later before the assembled pupils, we need have no fear of the dominance of literature. The reason

why college inspectors of high schools inveigh against undue emphasis upon literature is not that the pupils need less literature, but that they need more composition. The inspector deplores not the analysis of masterly prose, but the failure to inject some of the more obvious virtues of the masterpieces into the pupils' own shoddy writing. After having failed repeatedly in his Freshman themes, a student of mine once told me that his previous training in composition had consisted in an analysis of considerable selections from the prose of Cardinal Newman, unaccompanied by any writing of themes. The final exhortation of his teacher had been, "Should you ever have occasion to write, imitate Cardinal Newman." Naturally enough the style of this boy's Freshman themes in no way suggested that of his famous model.

2. Another striking phenomenon of the *lycée* instruction in composition is the prevailing emphasis upon the organization of ideas. However great the attention given to sentence structure and diction, and to the value of ideas in themselves, the chief emphasis, I was led to believe, is placed upon general arrangement. Even in his earliest narrative and descriptive efforts the pupil is taught to follow some sort of outline that he can rationally defend. In encouraging this procedure upon the part of the pupil, the teacher commonly makes use of the *matière*, or outline, to which, as I have shown above, the *Instructions* of 1909 give considerable attention. This outline is not a fussy, formal array of numerous subheadings, but a live analysis of main ideas, arranged in a sensible, logical order. An application of the *matière* much in favor is made as follows: Upon the blackboard, in the presence of the class, the teacher develops an outline of a supposedly original description or narration, to be worked out by the pupil at home. When the pupil returns to class with his theme, he is confronted with the passage from some well-known author upon which the teacher had formed the original outline. The pupil finds himself, then, in unexpected competition with a masterpiece, and is in the best situation possible for observing and applying some of the superior literary virtues of his inspiring rival. This sort of stimulus, I was told, is particularly grateful and profitable to French youth.

3. As to the subjects assigned for themes in the French *lycées* the American visitor is liable to surprise. At any rate, from my own previous reading and from random conversations I had inferred that the French curriculum encouraged highly literary and ambitious subjects, somewhat remote from simple, actual life. My attention had not yet been called to the relevant pronouncements of the official *Instructions*. Thanks to the French habit of keeping class notebooks, I am able to give the following typical list from a teacher's *cahier de textes* prepared during the year 1910-11 for a *Classe de Quatrième*:

1. Recount in the form of a letter or a narration your experiences during the day of vacation of which you remember most.
2. Recount the story of the child who chased flies. (A careful *matière* was provided for this theme.)
3. The country mouse recounts his adventure with the city mouse.
4. A day of vacation forfeited. Recount after the manner of the fable *Terrette et le pot de lait*.
5. Express your regret over the loss of a pet animal.
6. Compare two passages from La Fontaine, expressing your preference.

One must admit that this list offers not only a gratifying variety, but also a generous amount of human interest. Although it is true that a certain number of teachers seem still to favor literary and moral topics, the general tendency is toward subjects from actual life. One teacher, however, gave me the surprising testimony that in his efforts to introduce live subjects, he encountered the opposition of parents, who, as he averred, often prefer to have their children write about more portentous ideas.

4. Of the enthusiasm and art displayed by French teachers in the classroom one can scarcely speak too highly. A visitor accustomed to the commendable orderliness of our American high schools is hardly prepared for the freedom and informality of the French classroom. The teacher usually seemed to me to be a veritable comrade among comrades. Mild restlessness and disorder were all forgotten in the general vivacity of the room and in the vigorous pursuit of live results. The recitations of the pupils seemed to me surprisingly full, sincere, and well considered. My impression was that oral composition was in constant operation,

for each pupil seemed to be eager not only to speak, but also to express himself in good form. The striking alertness of the class during the hour devoted to the collective correction of themes was due, I believe, in large measure to the fact that, since all the pupils had written upon the same subject, all were alive to the same general criticisms. Of the art displayed by the best teachers in this collective exercise I have already mentioned an inspiring instance.

In the brief account given above, the American teacher will, of course, find nothing conspicuously new or original. In devices for teaching composition our own country has been, for a decade or two, uncommonly prolific, and it seems quite unnecessary for us to look abroad for further information as to what to do in the classroom. What one misses in American teaching of the subject, after a sojourn in France, is not knowledge, but *real motive*, the real motive inherent in a national pride in refined and effective native prose. The superior results achieved by the French in their teaching of composition are due, not to their wits, but to their devotion; not to their organization, but to their tradition.